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ALEXANDRE RICORD'S DISSERTATION OF 1824

BY

HENRY E. SIGERIST

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Alexandre Ricord's father was a ship-owner of the Compagnie des Indes. He left France as soon as the Revolution broke out, or possibly even before, and went to America, to Guadeloupe first and from there to Baltimore where he arrived in 1790.[1] He already had a son, Jean Baptiste Ricord, born in Paris in 1777. Jean Baptiste became a distinguished physician and naturalist. He married Elizabeth Stryker, descendant of a New Amsterdam family, and had a son, Frederick William (1819-1897) who became a well-known man of letters and public official in New Jersey. Jean Baptiste died in 1827 in the West Indies.

Alexandre Ricord, the author of our dissertation and brother of Jean Baptiste, was born in Baltimore in 1798 and two years later on December 10, 1800 the youngest son of the family, Philippe, was born, in Baltimore also.

The three Ricord brothers all studied medicine as their grandfather had done. Jean Baptiste's and Alexandre's chief interests, however, were in natural history while Philippe made a remarkable medical career in Paris. A student of Dupuytren, he was appointed Surgeon-in-chief for syphilis at the Hôpital du Midi in 1831 and became the leading syphilologist of the time.

Alexandre made his career in France also. He went to Paris in order to study medicine and stayed there after graduating in 1824.

Dr. Harry Friedenwald, a warm friend of our Institute who never comes with empty hands, very kindly presented us with a copy of Ricord's inaugural dissertation. The title is: *Dissertation sur quelques points de médecine pratique; Présentée et soutenue à la Faculté*

[1] Concerning the Ricord family see *Nouvelle Biographie Générale,* Vol. 42, Paris 1863, col. 267.—Kelly and Burrage, *Dictionary of American Medical Biography,* New York, London, 1928, p. 1036 f.—*Dictionary of American Biography,* Vol. XV, New York, 1935, p. 587 f. There is some confusion of dates in the various dictionaries.

de Médecine de Paris, le 20 août 1824; Par Alexandre Ricord, Docteur en Médecine.[2]

The dissertation is dedicated: A mon frère, J. B. Ricord Madianna, Docteur en médecine de l'université de New-York; Membre de plusieurs Sociétés savantes d'Europe et d'Amérique. A mon frère, Philippe Ricord, Ex-Pharmacien militaire, Élève de première classe de l'école pratique; Chirurgien interne de première classe des hôpitaux et hospices civils de Paris, etc. A mon estimable ami et cher collègue, Joseph-François-Marie Rodriguez, (De Canarie.) Docteur en médecine et en chirurgie de la Faculté de Paris, etc., etc.

Jean Baptiste Ricord has the name Madianna added to his family name. According to Kelly and Burrage (l. c.) Madianna was the name of Ricord's homestead in France and he signed many of his writings in this way.

Alexandre seems not to have been enthusiastic about the obligation of presenting a dissertation. He states it quite clearly in the preface:

Avant-Propos.

Cédant à la nécessité, et remplissant un devoir qui m'est imposé, je présente aujourd'hui une thèse. Mais vais-je mieux faire que ce qui a été fait avant moi? ou bien vais-je offrir quelque chose de neuf? L'une ou l'autre de ces deux conditions est bien difficile à remplir; et le champ de la science, quoique fertile, a déjà été si bien moissonné par des mains heureuses et savantes, que les miennes, encore faibles et peu accoutumées au travail, y glaneront peut-être sans être récompensées de leur peine. Quoi qu'il en soit, je vais remplir ma tâche, en réclamant toutefois l'indulgence de mes juges.

Quelques points de médecine pratique font le sujet de ma dissertation. Si j'ai mal fait, qu'on se rappelle que ma faute n'est pas volontaire, et que je n'ai écrit que parce qu'il fallait écrire.

The dissertation is as brief as can be. It contains only 20 pages and discusses only four points of practical medicine in a rather cursory way. But it is mostly based on Ricord's own observations and on experiences gathered in America, so that to the reader it must have had a certain exotic flavor.

The first point deals: *De la piqûre des insectes venimeux, particulièrement de celle du scorpion de Sainte-Lucie, réputée mortelle par*

[2] The dissertation was printed: A Paris, de l'Imprimerie de Didot le Jeune, Imprimeur de la Faculté de Médecine, rue des Maçons-Sorbonne, nº 13. 1824.

les habitans de cette île, et de l'utilité de la teinture de cantharides et du laudanum liquide de Sydenham pour la guérison des accidens qui en résultent.

Ricord was a passionate hunter, and while hunting in the forests of America he was frequently stung by insects. He found that it was not the sting that caused the violent pain, because if you removed it the pain still persisted. The cause was rather an irritant liquid which entered the skin with the sting. Ricord devised the following method of removing the substance. Whenever he was stung he immediately applied one or several drops of tincture of cantharides. The result was a violent blistering inflammation that not only prevented the absorption of the venom but, through the secretion it caused, drove the poison out and with it the sting. He then opened the blister, removed the epidermis, and applied laudanum to relieve the pain. Finally he covered the wound with gold-beaters' skin (baudruche)[3] which he attached with fish-glue (ichthyocole).

From then on he never went hunting without a bottle of tincture of cantharides and laudanum, and he was no longer afraid of insects.

Once, on a trip to the island of Saint Lucia in the West Indies Ricord made experiments with his remedy on scorpion bites. A rat bitten by a scorpion died within 6 hours. Another rat bitten in the same way survived after it had been treated with the tincture of cantharides. Soon thereafter a young negress was bitten by a scorpion. She was suffering intense pain when Ricord saw her. After application of the tincture the pains disappeared in less than 15 minutes and the patient had no evil effects.

Ricord's conclusion was that insect bites should never be treated internally but locally in the indicated way.

The tincture made from cantharides or Spanish flies was a very popular remedy used from Hippocratic days on as a local irritant in the treatment of a variety of ailments. Taken internally it has a strong irritant action on the genito-urinary tract and was used for centuries as an aphrodisiac.[4]

[3] Baudruche, or gold-beaters' skin, was made from the outer coat of the caecum of the ox and was frequently used for covering wounds.

[4] I cannot resist the temptation to quote from the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales,* a learned encyclopedia of medicine, published in the beginning of the

Laudanum, an opium tincture, was in those days usually made after the prescription of Sydenham:[5]

Sherry wine		1 pound
Opium		2 ounces
Saffron		1 ounce
Powder of cinnamon	aa	1 ounce
" " cloves		

The second note describes the syphilis treatment of Dupuytren. Guillaume Dupuytren (1778-1835) was at that time the leading surgeon of the Hôtel-Dieu. A hard worker but extremely ambitious, conceited and vain, he wrote little himself and preferred to have his students describe his treatments. Thus he could speak of himself in the third person which, as Malgaigne said, " stands praise better than the first person."[6] And besides he could always disclaim a statement if he found it opportune to do so.

The syphilis treatment described by Ricord combined mercury with sudorific and narcotic drugs. It seemed highly suitable to combat " the most recent as well as the most inveterate and recalcitrant venereal disease."

The patient was given three times a day, in the morning, at noon and in the evening, at least one hour before meals a pill containing

19th century by a group of physicians that included the most famous names of the day. The passage taken from the article *Cantharide* (Vol. 4, 1813, p. 19) shows that an encyclopedia is not necessarily arid, but can be written in a most poetic style:

" Une des plus belles attributions du système nerveux est, sans contredit, de présider à la reproduction. Les organes destinés à cette admirable fonction, doivent à leur texture, presque toute nerveuse, ces élans délicieux de la volupté qui entraînent irrésistiblement un sexe vers l'autre. Ce penchant qui va jusqu'à la fureur chez certains individus, s'affaiblit et s'éteint chez quelques autres, de manière à laisser leur coeur fermé à la passion la plus douce: on dirait que la plus charmante moitié de l'espèce humaine n'existe plus pour eux. Cette affligeante asthénie n'est pas toujours désespérée; elle cède par fois aux moyens thérapeutiques spécialement destinés à stimuler les organes génitaux languissans. Ces moyens, dont l'emploi judicieux des cantharides est certainement un des plus énergiques, sont connus sous le nom d'*aphrodisiaques*."

[5] See *The Works of Thomas Sydenham,* Trans. by R. G. Latham, London (Sydenham Society), 1848, Vol. I, p. xcix.

[6] *Nouvelle Biographie Générale,* Vol. XV, Paris 1856, col. 396.

Extract of Guaiac ..... ¼ grain
Extract of China-root ..... ¼ grain
Aqueous extract of Opium ..... ¼ grain
Bichloride of Mercury ..... ⅛ grain
Starch q. s.

The pills had to be fresh. After each pill the patient drank a glass of the following decoction

China-root .....
Sarsaparilla ..... āā ½ ounce
Guaiac .....
Water ..... 2 pounds

which was boiled until it was reduced by one-third. To the morning and evening glass was added 2 ounces of sudorific syrup.[7]

The treatment must be continued long after the symptoms have disappeared. In inveterate cases the after-treatment must be given for just as much time as was required to eliminate the symptoms.

The third very short observation concerned a patient who was complaining of anaphrodisia. The case history revealed that he was employed in a drug store and slept in a back room on bales that contained camphor. His complaint had developed since he slept under such conditions.

Ricord advised the patient to sleep in a well ventilated room whereupon sexual desire and potency were restored in a few days. From then on Ricord used camphor vapours in the treatment of priapism, gonorrhoea, satyriasis and nymphomania. Esquirol had used camphor internally in the treatment of hysteria, but the internal application affected the stomach and could even result in poisoning. Ricord

[7] According to the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales,* (Vol. 53, Paris 1821, p. 160 f.), sudorific syrup was made in this way: (1) Take 1 pound each of sarsaparilla and guaiac, 12 pounds of water. Infuse on hot ashes for 24 hours, reduce to one-half by boiling very slowly, strain and add 1½ pounds each of cassonade and honey, or 3 pounds of cassonade alone. Boil this until it reaches the consistency of a syrup. (2) Take 1 pound of sarsaparilla macerated for one day in 6 pounds of water, boil it on a low fire 4 hours, decant, repeat the operation until the extractive part of the sarsaparilla is exhausted. Mix the decoctions together, add 2 pounds of sugar, clarify and let it boil to the consistency of syrup.

therefore recommended that such patients be kept in apartments where camphor was evaporating.

The fourth and last section of the dissertation deals with *seasickness,* a disease from which Ricord himself suffered repeatedly. As immediate causes he considered the evil smell of the ship—due to tar or to the cargo—and the motion of the ship. Indirect contributing causes were the changed mode of living, a depressed state of mind, humidity, etc. He then described the well-known symptoms and stated that similar symptoms occurred in persons riding backwards in a carriage.

Prophylactically sea travellers should try to become accustomed in advance to the smell of tar which they could do by carrying a small piece of tarred rope around for some time. They should not take a boat that has a cargo of sugar or hides, or similar substances that have a nauseating smell. Once on board they should live on deck and avoid the interior of the boat that is always damp and hot and where the smell is strongest. Good drinking water is also important.

As to the treatment, most of the innumerable remedies recommended fail. Yet there are some that have real advantages. Psychological factors are important. People should be treated very gently. All kinds of entertainments, music among others, are good. Violent emotions can stop the disease suddenly, as Ricord experienced himself.

Once while sailing from Sainte-Marie to Pointe-à-Pître along the coast of Guadeloupe, he was frightfully seasick, vomiting all the time. The boat suddenly ran aground on a rock about a mile from the small island called Ilette à Cochon. The colored crew immediately jumped into the water and swam to shore, abandoning Ricord who could not swim. In this desperate situation he suddenly lost his seasickness and acted as cooly as if he had never been ill. Tying himself to the wreck, he let himself be driven to the shore by wind and waves. And another surprise was in store for him. At the time of the accident he had been suffering for the last six months from a tertian fever that would not yield to any treatment. His next attack was due an hour after he had been rescued, but although he had to stay in wet clothes for a long time, the attack never came and he was cured of his fever.

Ricord found two remedies effective against seasickness. One was compression of the abdomen by means of a broad belt or girdle, a measure already recommended by various writers. He drew attention to the fact that such belts were worn by the Dutch and by Mediterranean fishermen.

The other remedy was opium taken three times a day in increasing doses up to one and a half grains in 24 hours. In between he drank an infusion of sassafras, very hot, with sugar.

Ricord's dissertation is a very slight contribution to medicine which he himself did not take all too seriously. I have mentioned it because it adds to the biography of a native son of Baltimore who was a member of a most distinguished medical family and who became a noted scientist himself. Short as the dissertation is, it reveals the mind of a man who observed nature without prejudice and drew conclusions from his observations.